

"SOULS ON FIRE"

A Story of Russian Intrigue, Love and Adventure

By LOUIS TRACY

Author of "The Wings of the Morning," "The Pillar of Light," Etc.

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CHAPTER I

The Sign of the Three Pyramids

BY JOVE!" thought Frank Armstrong, as he stood for a moment on the north side of Regent-st., near to the colonnade, "it is good to be in town again!"

A great many millions of people have poised irresolutely on that identical spot. To step off the curbstone implies a plunge into the vortex of Piccadilly Circus. Straight in front is the line of least

resistance. A double stream of traffic must be forded, it is true, but its currents are sharply defined by a midway rest. That is the route for strangers and timid women, who have the huge pile of the Criterion as an objective. There are policemen, with sentinel arms, marking the danger points. There are waits and inglorious rushes of well-dressed hordes; but there is safety.

Bolder spirits breast the maelstrom of hoofs and wheels through which lies the nearer diagonal path; they dodge the stand of the Atlas and Old Times buses, run the gauntlet of keen-eyed flower-girls, flit between several rows of fast-running vehicles, ranging from two-ton railway vans to carrier-tricycles, and finally emerge, if not carried to Charing Cross Hospital, into the haven of broad pavement in front of the well-known theater and restaurant.

Being a bold spirit, Armstrong chose the direct road. With the splendid phlegm of the British officer under fire, he did not hurry, and with the proverbial luck of that venturesome person, he suffered no more loss than the white ash off an excellent cigar.

Then he halted, faced north, spread out his feet, propped his Malacca cane with both hands behind him, and took another inspiring sniff of London.

"Yes," he said, being a sociable creature who could converse cheerfully with himself, "this beats Russian steppe or Indian maidan sky high."

He really could talk in much more lofty strain, having the gift of tongues. But when a man chats at ease with his own consciousness he may be permitted to indulge in a little expressive slang.

The commissioner pacing the front of the theater cocked an eye at him. This man saw tens of thousands of people daily; but he carried four bits of ribbon on the left breast of his trim uniform, and he could pick out a soldier in mufti from the multitude, as the farmer can distinguish oats from barley when the green shoots are an inch above the ground.

"Um," he commended, noting the squared shoulders, the straight back, the neat blue-serge suit and brown boots that seemed to be molded to the wearer, "a young officer home on leave. Staff Corps, I reckon; Bengal Lancer, by the cut of him."

He was not mistaken. And to him, a worn veteran, this outer London of May, with its glitter of fashion and busy life, straightway became dull and colorless. His mind's eye roved along the white,



"How Can You English Believe? Danes Came Here, and Normans, But That Was a Thousand Years Ago. A Thousand Years Ago We Russians Were Happy"

gun-barrel roads of an Indian cantonment; he looked at the brown foot-hills, those mere Alps, of the Himalayas; he wandered toward the rugged Khyber until he saw a kafila of camels coming down to Peshawar from Ali Musjid.

Blithely unconscious that he had evoked day-dreams in a commissioner, Armstrong gazed his fill at the passing show.

It was familiar, yet wholly new, to his refreshed senses. He had reached London only that morning by the mail train from Berlin, Wirbalken and Moscow. It was a fine day in the height of the season; he had plenty of money (for a subaltern) in his pocket; he had a month's leave before he need trouble the P. & O. for a ticket, and he could enjoy life to the fullest extent compatible with a well-balanced mind and a sober taste. No wonder that "Town" should be good to his eyes, and the very scent of it grateful to his nostrils!

He waited there for no reason. It was in his mind to lunch at the Junior United Service Club. He had no plans for the day. Blow plans! He would just drift, and let the social eddy carry him whither it listed.

Yet he had grave cause, in after time, to remember that happy-go-lucky pause by the wayside. Never was man drawn into more perilous rapid than he who loitered that day on the bank of the life-river which flowed placidly before him.

In the first place, a string of sandwich men sauntered slowly, with downcast vision, along the gutter from Coventry-st. These woe-begones did not veil their eyes because of misery or shame. They were looking for cigar-stumps and the raveled ends of cigarettes. Armstrong became aware of the fact, forcibly, as it were. He took a fresh cigar from his case, lit it with the glowing remains of

its predecessor, and narrowly escaped having the new one knocked from between his teeth when the nearest sandwich man made a wild dive for the "stub," canting his placarded framework with care-less energy as he bent double.

"Poor fellow!" mused Armstrong, with ready laugh, as the standard-bearer strolled on, eking out the remains of the recovered treasure. Then the waving posters caught his attention.

"Well, of all the queer things!" ran his comment. "Old Demidoff here!"

In bold letters of red, on the frontal placard, were the words: "Souls on Fire!" It was a catching phrase. It meant people to gaze at the procession, and it succeeded. On the back one learned that at the Anarchists' Club on such-and-such a street, Tottenham Court Road, that evening, Prince Demidoff, "the famous Russian Exile," would lecture on the "tortured condition of his oppressed fellow-countrymen."

Anarchists' Club! Tottenham Court Road! Was there ever such a mad association of ideas? And old Demidoff—a spectacled scientist, a white-haired visionary who would not hurt a fly! Armstrong knew his Russia well enough to appreciate the dumb tragedy which lay behind the printed words; but just now he could only grin at the humor of it. Anarchists!—with staid London policemen piloting their out-at-heel heralds across the Circus!

Suddenly a hansom pulled up, and out sprang a tall, slight youngster, a boy with a bright, pleasant face and a self-possessed air not often seen in English youths of his age. He appeared twenty or twenty-one at the most.

"You, Armstrong?" he cried. "Well, of all the jolly surprises!"

"You don't mean to say you are in town, Jimmie?" said the other with that fine disregard for the meaning of words displayed by people when they are taken by surprise.

"Ra-ther! The whole gang is in Charles-st., Berkeley Square. We've taken a place there for the season."

"And how is everybody?"

"Valletort is all right, and the mater is becoming a true British countess. Ernie is 'out,' presented last Court, and fearfully stuck on herself. Anyhow, come along to lunch."

"Well—er—"

"In with you. Right in front, cabby."

Lord Carlingham's mother, in her youth, was a belle of New-York society, so his remark about the "mater" was clearly irreverent. "Valletort" was his father, with the omitted formality of "The Right Hon. the Earl of," and "Ernie" was his sister, Lady Ermyntude Grandison—for in such wise do the names of the British aristocracy puzzle the benighted foreigner.

Armstrong evidently was a favorite with the whole family. He had met them in St. Petersburg the previous winter while he was studying the language, and chance threw him a good deal in their



Prince Boris Melnikoff

Undenially Handsome, of the Leonine Type